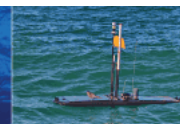




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There is little political consensus on climate change policy.

Climate change debate on the agenda as Coalition looks to scrap Labor policies (Page 1 of 2)

By Martin Kovacs, 20 Sep 2013

With the newly elected Coalition government set on repealing the carbon tax, and with an emissions trading scheme (ETS) now well and truly off the agenda, the context of the climate change debate and appropriate emissions mitigation measures has once again shifted at a political level in Australia.

On the back of promises of an ETS, the former Labor government swept to power in 2007; now, six years on, and post-global financial crisis, a Coalition government headed by a leader long vocal in his opposition to the carbon tax has been endorsed by the electorate to take the political reins.

Climate change and emissions mitigation measures have formed an important component of Australian political debate over the last decade, playing a big role in electioneering, the rise and fall of parties, and the rise and fall of leaders.

Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd more than most is aware of the double-edged nature of the debate, famously declaring climate change 'the great moral challenge of our generation' during the 2007 election campaign in which he was swept to power promising to implement an ETS by 2010.

Having assumed government, however, Labor's legislation failed to gain the necessary support, with the advent of the global financial crisis changing economic priorities. Tony Abbott was installed as Liberal Party leader, ramping up the Coalition's anti-ETS rhetoric, labelling it a 'great big new tax', and successfully setting a new tone for the political debate.

After being ousted as prime minister, Rudd labelled the subsequent abandonment of the policy a mistake, the result of failed attempts to get the legislation through the Senate and internal Labor Party mechanisations.

Prior to this year's election, and upon his return to the top job, Rudd immediately announced his intention to bring forward the introduction of the ETS, with the Opposition once again firmly opposed. Rudd was unable to deliver another term of government, and Labor, which has stated it will oppose any attempts to remove the carbon tax, must now closely be considering its climate change policies and strategy in the new political environment.

Another former Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard in a recent article for *Guardian Australia* wrote Labor "must continue to stand behind the significant policies which are right but are currently outside the national political consensus", writing, "clearly, carbon pricing is the political giant of this class".

"Without doubt, Tony Abbott won this public opinion war and dominated this political conversation," Gillard wrote. "The times suited him. For most Australians the last long drought was perceived to be the result of climate change, and when the drought broke their concerns about climate change receded.

"The circus in Copenhagen and 'climategate' fed scepticism. Then, at the worst time, the structure of the Australian electricity market delivered huge rises to the electricity bills of families. While cost of living pressures were easing in other parts of the family budget, the pain of these big, lumpy bills was acute and remembered."

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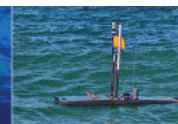
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Gillard, like Rudd before her, noted Labor fundamentally failed in its handling of the issue.

"I erred by not contesting the label 'tax' for the fixed price period of the emissions trading scheme I introduced," Gillard wrote. "I feared the media would end up playing constant silly word games with me, trying to get me to say the word 'tax'. I wanted to be on the substance of the policy, not playing 'gotcha'. But I made the wrong choice and, politically, it hurt me terribly."

Climate change mitigation by its very nature demands long-term policy outlook, and a degree of political bipartisanship, and in the comparatively short-term political cycle it will be interesting to see how the Coalition now approaches policy and initiatives left over from the Labor government.

A recent *Reuters* article noted the 'irony' of Abbott preparing to scrap the carbon tax, while in the north west of Western Australia the Chevron-operated Gorgon project is preparing to host the 'world's most ambitious project for capturing carbon dioxide and storing it underground'.

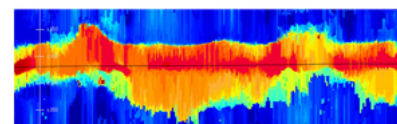
"Under an ambitious programme agreed with the state and federal governments back in 2009, Chevron will inject the CO₂ into a saline aquifer beneath Barrow Island off the coast of Western Australia," the article states. "Chevron is spending \$2 B on the world's largest CO₂ injection facility, which will store over 3 MMt per year, making it by far the world's largest CO₂ storage project, and creating a unique opportunity to study how injected CO₂ behaves underground in saline aquifers."

Prior to the election, the Coalition announced it would 'redirect' funding from Labor's Carbon Capture and Storage Flagships Program, and, despite playing host to the massive Gorgon CCS project, the future for CCS in Australia appears bleak. With the Coalition also set to axe the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, policy developments in renewable energy will also be of interest.

Recent media reports the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has got its figures wrong on the impact of carbon emissions on global warming has added fresh spice to the debate, and in the theatre of Australian politics, with the Coalition intent on scrapping the carbon tax and Labor opposing the move, it is now certainly a case of watch this space.

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